CHAPTER 8

America Secedes From the Empire, 1775-1783:
Discussion Topics

1. Show how Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence changed the meaning of the fighting. Explain why even Patriots were at first reluctant to proclaim independence and how they eventually came to link their struggle for rights with the break from Britain.

2. Show how Washington and his generals essentially pursued a “defensive” strategy in the early phase of the war, while the British had to try for a quick victory. Explain why the Battle of Saratoga was so crucial politically as well as militarily.

3. Discuss the political dimensions of the war, particularly the civil war between Patriots and Loyalists and the politics of the French alliance. Focus on the role of the American military effort in swinging the neutral population to the Patriot cause.

4. Discuss how the Revolution has been viewed and celebrated in various periods of American history (e.g., on Independence Day).

5. Discuss Washington’s dual role as practical military strategist and heroic symbol of the Patriot cause.

6. Examine the Declaration of Independence as both historical document and Revolutionary propaganda. Discuss the short-term and long-term historical significance of the grand rhetoric in the first part and the specific indictment in the second part.

7. Take the perspective of colonists loyal to the crown and write a Declaration of Loyalty. Model the document on the Declaration of Independence. Begin with a grand rhetorical statement of philosophy and proceed to a list of colonial transgressions against the crown. Determine whether Loyalists could reasonably oppose the Patriots. Discuss whether a Declaration of Loyalty would have been able to effectively counter the arguments found in the Declaration of Independence.

8. Discuss the role of women in the American Revolution, including both their part in revolutionary events and the new understandings that began to develop regarding their public role as “daughters of liberty” and the questions that arose.

9. Compare the American Revolution to other major national revolutions past and present. Focus on the revolutions and struggles for independence in “new nations” like Mexico, India, and Iran (use the internet as a resource).

10. Why have the Loyalists been largely forgotten in American historical memory? Do they deserve to be better known? Do you agree with the text that they were often “tragic” figures? Why or why not? Provide specific evidence for your answer.

11. Did the Loyalists act primarily out of conviction and feelings of patriotism toward Britain, or out of self-interest? Provide specific evidence for your answer.
12. If you had been an African American, free or slave, in 1776, would you have tried to back the Patriot cause or the Loyalist cause? Why or why not? Provide specific examples for your answer.

13. What was radical and new in the Declaration of Independence, and what was old and traditional? What did statements like "all men are created equal" mean in their historical context, and what did they come to mean later?

14. Was military strategy or politics the key to American victory in the war? How did the two coincide? Site specific evidence/examples for your answer.

15. If the "Model Treaty" that John Adams authored had been the basis for the American alliance with France, would the results of the Revolution have been the same? Do you agree that Benjamin Franklin's French alliance is an example of "practical self-interest trumping idealism," as the authors state? In what other situations during the Revolutionary War does practical self-interest trump idealism?

16. Did the Loyalists deserve to be persecuted and driven out of the country? What difference does it make to understand the Revolution as a civil war between Americans as well as a war against the British? Back up your argument with examples.

17. How important were the diplomatic relations between European nations in determining the success of the American Revolution? How significant a role did the French play in securing American independence? How significant a role did the rest of Europe play? How did the American Revolution change diplomatic relations in Europe?

18. What has the Revolution meant to later generations of Americans, including our own? Do we still think of the United States as a revolutionary nation? Why or why not? Provide supporting details for your answer.